The National Importance of Industrial Education

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NEW YORK STATE BRANCH

OF THE

National Society for the Promotion of Industrial Education

THE NATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF INDUSTRIAL EDUCATION

BY

DR. RUSH RHEES

ADDRESS AT

THE SECOND ANNUAL CONVENTION

ROCHESTER, N. Y., NOVEMBER 19, 1909

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THE NATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF INDUSTRIAL EDUCATION*

By DR. RUSH RHEES,
President of the University of Rochester.

In accepting the honor conferred upon me of presiding over the deliberations of this convention, I desire first of all to take occasion to extend the most hearty welcome to those who have come here from other parts of the State to bring us the advantage which we inevitably must gain from their deliberations upon this question—a question than which none other is of more pressing importance in connection with present day problems of education. You who have come to us from other cities, towns and villages of the State, are most heartily welcome for yourselves, and for the work which you represent.

It has been suggested to me that for the courtesy that has been extended to me in making me the Chairman of this meeting, I am expected to make a few remarks on this subject of the National Importance of Industrial Education: The topic is one of such breadth and variety that the maker of the program evidently thought he was perfectly safe in naming it. The greatest wanderings of thought on the subject may be covered by the title. I shall ask your attention to one or two aspects of the question that seem to be of importance and take the risk of saying things that are perfectly familiar and commonplace and things of which perhaps you need no reminder.

It has been our boast for generations that American

* Printed from stenographer's notes.

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workmen surpass in efficiency and in versatility any other workmen the world around. Several months ago while in Paris I was talking with a gentleman concerning problems of the tariff and I was very much interested to learn that whereas in this country we ask for a high percentage of import duty on the ground that we desire to protect the American workman from the low paid labor of Europe, they in France make urgent demand for high protective duties in order, as they claim, to protect the poor French worker from the superior efficiency of the American laborer. It is recognized abroad everywhere that the American laborer produces more in a given time than any other laborer upon the face of the earth, and hence it seems a little strange at first thought that we should be telling of the urgent need for industrial education in this country of ours.

The qualities of resourcefulness and power and versatility have been the characteristics of the American workman and on this we have relied in supreme measure for the superiority in business enterprise which is our boast. Let us consider for a moment the source of those qualities which have made the American workingman what he is. In this land there has been developed a type of man of superior natural energy. We contrast his qualities of mind and body with those qualities found in the laboring man of Europe and find a great advantage in our physical power and in our intellectual quality, partly due to superior strength of native stock. We cannot forget the fact also that our country was peopled, in the beginning, by a group of pioneers; and who were they? They were men of irresistible forcefulness, surrounded by unfavorable conditions, who had the characteris-

tics and the strength to reach out into new regions, and who had the power to conquer them. The American workingman is the descendant of men who subdued the wilderness and made it blossom as the rose. They were men who came here from Europe, men of superior mind and energy, they were men of more than ordinary venturesomeness and resourcefulness and alertness. They made up the original stock from which the American laborer has been derived. In this country, they developed superior versatility in the clearing of the forest and the building of homes and the making of civilized life and conditions.

In the early days, as it used to be in New England, a man brought up on the farm had to turn his hand to practically every trade that is known in industry. If the harness broke he had to turn saddler. If the plow was injured or worn he had to turn plowright or blacksmith and iron worker. If the wagon broke down he must mend the wheel; and everything else called for versatility. There was no shop around the corner. He was compelled by all the conditions of life surrounding him to depend upon himself and turn his hands to every conceivable task. This training developed men who had inventive genius in industrial life, and men who could adapt themselves now to this, and now to that task. Now, the serious question for us is this: what is the present value of the reliance we have been accustomed to place upon the renowned efficiency and versatility of the American workingman? We have to acknowledge that the days of the pioneer are practically done. There are yet some unconquered regions in the extreme west, but that country contributes very little to the industrial life of the nation, and east of the Rocky Mountains

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the pioneer is practically a thing of the past. There is no more of that exacting life that called for the qualities of venturesomeness and ability.

Whereas a generation ago the men who supplied the needs of the factory came to the factory from the farm, we do well to remember that to-day the workmen who come to us have no such training as they did before. The life and training they undergo now is more adapted to producing men skilled in buying and selling than in manufacturing. They are no longer of the former sturdy type of men of a generation ago who were adding to the resources of the country. And finally, in this connection, in the new industrial dispensation there is something which caps the climax of all these rather discouraging considerations. For, whereas formerly a man went into a factory to learn a trade, now the progress of industry is such that the man is set at a machine to do a task, and sometimes even it seems as if modern industry puts a premium on absence of intellect and the man who can watch his machine with the least thought is regarded more profitable than any other employee. Whereas formerly industry was a school, to-day it seems to be more like a prison. What is the result? Instead of being a man who can adapt himself to conditions, the worker is narrowed by extreme specialization in his work. If he is to acquire the necessary versatility to take the place of the famous American artisan of former times, where is it to be done? Where are we to find competent journeymen.

I have heard employers say, we have only one place to look to for competent journeymen and that is from emigration. If such are the facts, is it necessary to say anything more in regard to the need for some

sort of industrial education which will tend to supply what is lacking in our present order of life, in order that the men who are to be our artisans to-morrow, may have some of the peculiarities which gave prominence to the American workingman in the generation which is past? Such being the need, it is not my task to discuss it from the standpoint of industry, that task belongs to another of the speakers of this evening; my task is rather to ask attention to some features of the national importance of it.

We have been a people who have boasted much of our common sense. We rely upon an intelligent people as the basis of our self-preservation. We must remind ourselves again of familiar facts, that elaborate as is our system of schools which we have developed, there is a steady exodus from these schools after the early years. The boys and girls who enter the lower schools do not reach the upper classes of the grammar period, but few of them go into the high school, and a small fraction of those who seek the high school finish it. What becomes of those who drop out, and why do they drop out? That exodus, as we are reminded, is due partly to economic necessity, and the child drops out as soon as he is able to earn something to contribute to the family support. Another reason, more serious, is the lack of interest in study which develops in the minds of many of the students. This fact is coming to be recognized as it never has been before recognized; for this we give much thanks.

Under earlier conditions in former years, the boy who became an apprentice did not leave school; he continued in school. He was required to use his mind. He was compelled to come to some understanding of his trade. The succeeding three or four or five years

were years of such consecutive, accumulative work and experience that they brought the boy somewhere and gave him what should be called education. I meet many manufacturers who say, we have no time nor money to teach a boy a trade. Such is the pressure of modern competition. Present industrial development seems to put a premium upon low intellectual attainment. The workman becomes a part of the machine. The national need then of industrial training becomes most eloquent. It is not that our markets are growing fewer, but our citizenship is growing poorer. The State must soon do for itself what the conditions of life no longer do for us, and in this way we may lay a foundation stone of national security.

Let us look for a moment to those who go through the grammar school into the high school. Some go on, step by step, to higher things and become the intellectual leaders of the community in one or another of the professions. Many continue in the high school because they have been taught an entirely artificial dislike to manual toil, and they only swell the ever increasing ranks of the people who are seeking clerical appointment, who would rather sit behind a desk and write in a book, or stand behind a counter and sell goods, than go into the field and dig potatoes or go into the factory and run a machine, who are filled with false notions that work with the mind is of a superior quality so far as dignity is concerned than to work with the hands. There is a large class in the community whose fundamental attitude to life has been falsified incidently by the emphasis that we are placing in the education which we offer to our youth.

It is altogether needless that I should say a word here as to the value and dignity of commercial work

or the work of exchange or the imperative necessity of it in our large counting houses and places of general business in connection with the progress of the country. But these industries must rest upon the productive power of the country or they will have nothing to do. If we are expecting to supply the country with a mass of youth who are ready to keep books and sell goods and are to depend upon emigration to supply us with people to manufacture the goods, we certainly are placing a false emphasis in our conception of the task of preparing the youth of our country to elevate the country's life and to defend its interests and advance them.

It is not intended to curtail the efforts to prepare youth for clerical life, but side by side with that we would place the effort to prepare young men and women as artisans so that they who are adapted for such careers may not be switched off to a commercial career perforce when they are ill adapted for it. Those who are adapted for it should be enabled to follow the career in which they can contribute most to the advancement of the interests of the land. It is of national import, therefore, that we should give heed to the problem of industrial education. We should comprehend and apply with well-balanced emphasis the different tasks that lie before this great company of people that we call Americans.

What is the question that is to-day facing France, England and Germany? Is it not the relation of public taxation to the department of industry and commerce? There is no fact of present day life so important and noteworthy as the place which Germany has taken in the commercial life of the world. It has been remarked so often it has become trite and commonplace and

unwelcome. But in connection with the subject we are considering to-night it cannot be left one side. Think of the position of Germany forty years ago, at the close of the Franco-German war. The eyes of Germany were turned then to the delicacy and artistic design of French artisans, and on the other hand to the finish and practical value of English products and of American products. Germany was forced to acknowledge, at the World's Fair, that her goods, set side by side with those of other countries, placed her "out of the running." Did she settle back on her military supremacy, or her well-secured literary leadership and scientific leadership? The German went home and established schools of design in order that there might be beauty in the work of his hands, and that his effort might produce results that were fair to look upon; and then he established schools for training in the trades that his work might have quality as well as beauty. He opened his eyes and what has been the result?

In these forty years Germany, from being a negligible factor in the world's commerce, has become the most troublesome competitor among the producing nations of the world. She is troublesome because of the excellence of her work, because of the fineness of the design, and because of the perfection of the finish, and because of the economic adaptation of her industries. It is not my purpose nor my right to rehearse in your hearing more about the advancement of industry in Germany. I desire only to emphasize the fact that in forty years from being considered negligible in commerce she has come to the front of the world's competitive life simply because she has provided herself means for educating the artisan, and it is the

success of her undertaking that I desire now to emphasize.

At the time Germany woke up to the importance of this question, we were receiving a very large number of German immigrants and we regarded them, and do regard them now, as probably the strongest element that has entered into our national life from across the ocean. To-day we are getting no more immigrants from Germany. They stay at home and work because the German government has made it convenient and attractive to them to stay at home; they provide old age pensions and other things. The German stays home and he is thoroughly well trained at home. Suitable schools have been provided for his thorough education in industrial pursuits. Now if we are regardful of the possibilities of national development and greatness we cannot ignore those indications.

We had immense advantages in the characteristics of the pioneer Yankee. We have seen that we can no longer congratulate ourselves on these advantages. We have seen that a nation once regarded as sluggish has forged steadily to the front, and what are we going to do about it? We must find some equivalent for that former versatility and energy and efficiency in the future plans for the education of to-morrow.

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